

# ***The Years of Permanent Midnight: The Liberalist Construction of the Philippine Nation in Cinema Under the US-Aquino Administration***

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## **abstract**

This study seeks to define the role of cinema in the formation/construction of the nation amidst the acceleration of global capital and the heightened need for outsourced and remotely-managed workers (both were manifested to the fruition of the BPO industry) in the earlier part of 2010s – both of which are supported by the intensification of the liberal economics and politics of the then administration of Benigno Aquino, III. Cinema is not referred in this study as a general aspect of nation-formation/construction, but rather a node from a wide network of apparatuses deployed to support and maintain the nation and subjects that were continually produced/reproduced. Jonathan Beller referred to this network of apparatuses as the

World-Media System which, for him, is also a “dominant network of abstractions that would organize all social processes in the service of capital.” The study aims to arrive at the kind of nation formed/constructed by these setting through the subjects produced by the World-Media System. The nation, as Kojin Karatani would stress coming from Benedict Anderson, is imagined through a certain mode of exchange. Karatani, however, would like to think of another kind of exchange than commodity-exchange. This study would depart from that notion considering the differences of historical developments between the global north and south: between the historical developments of former colonizers and former colonies. It is concluded in this study that the kind of subjects produced / reproduced by the World-Media System in the Philippines in 2010-2016 reflects much of the liberalist economics and politics of the then administration. These subjects produced, which I would later identify as the modern cynic, constitute a wider aspect of the definition of the nation.

**Keywords:** Liberalist Construction, Cinema, Media, Nation Formation, Government



## The Liberalist Construction of the Nation

The film *Year of Permanent Midnight*<sup>1</sup> opened with a young man and a young woman talking about the conflict which caused the split of the progressive student organization at the University of the Philippines during the 90s, where the film was set. On a later scene, we see the two persons knocking at a condo unit. They are welcomed by another person who later introduced us to their activity. The third person is describing in detail the progress of their project: to hack into a financial institution and digitally steal money. In this instance, the student-movement conflict that was being discussed earlier no longer rings in our ears. Instead, the wired room flattened the conflict into a singularity: it becomes a film about exploiting the hole of the then early global financial market. What seems to be an imbalance in writing makes sense to me as a symptom of the times of early digital age: the time when globalization is gaining a heightened momentum.

This study treats the Philippine nation in the logical sense of this momentum: the Philippines, being totally wired to the global market can only be imagined as

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<sup>1</sup> A short film directed by then film-student, Clare del Rosario, and written by Carlo Cielo. The film was shot as partial fulfillment for Del Rosario's Film Directing class. The film was first screened at the Annual Black Beret Competition at the UPFI Film Center in 2014.

such. Several factors are to be considered: the acceleration of global capital, the heightened need of the global community for outsourced workers (both as manifested to the fruition of the BPO industry) in the 2010s – both are supported by the intensification of the liberal culture and politics of the then administration. The Philippine nation is imagined in this essay in the same manner as the film mentioned above, only as one which has gained more maturity. With this, the manner of the nation-formation which lead to the nation being imagined only through and by globalization, as mentioned above, was enabled by liberalism.

The liberalist construction of the nation does not differ in imagination than that of a globalist one. The liberal thought is founded on the notion of “openness,” much like globalism, which aims to “encompass ever greater numbers of world spaces” which would eventually lead to “integration and interconnectivity.”<sup>2</sup> This integration and interconnectivity is never going to be possible without liberal method of “everyday political negotiation, consisting of various civic and cultural referents.”<sup>3</sup> Lisandro Claudio, in his book-length defense of liberalism through an intellectual history of its deployment in post-war Philippines, would look into liberalism more as the backdrop (in his words, “blueprint”) of the country’s overall composition. While

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<sup>2</sup> George Ritzer, "Introduction." *The Blackwell Companion to Globalization*. Ed. George Ritzer. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 16-28.

<sup>3</sup> Lisandro Claudio, *Liberalism and the Postcolony: Thinking the State in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Philippines*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017.

he keeps mentioning that his “liberal heroes” have had a hand with economic-policy making, he did not perceive liberalism’s blueprint also working on the economic level. He viewed liberalism generally as a polity – moreover, a polity of possibility and openness.<sup>4</sup>

This openness manifested in Philippine cinema through a new variation of production popularly termed as “maindie”. The release of CinemaOne Originals’ commercial breakout film, *That Thing Called Tadhana* (2014), indicated its first full realization. In an earlier period, Rolando Tolentino identifies as the “mainstreaming of independent cinema” as a practice which has become prevalent on the latter part of 2000s.<sup>5</sup> What was before in the periphery of cinematic market is now in the center of discursive and practical approaches of both the affirmative and critical sides of the film scene. The big studios banked into producing or distributing similar works – and most gaining same reception - as *That Thing Called Tadhana*.

For this study, I would like to look at “maindie” as the site of the liberalist construction of the Philippine

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<sup>4</sup> “...openness makes liberalism the product of governance... an openness to dissent and the willingness to compromise...” “Liberalism [is] a fleeting concept that operates more as a blueprint than as an ideology[...];” “...liberalism does not have steady friends or foes, it is because it negotiates those categories through constant praxis.” *ibid*, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> This was, for him, embodied by the existence of Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival and its emphasis on “narrative, continuity [and] suture,” similar to the focus of Hollywood. See Rolando B. Tolentino, *Indie Cinema at mga Sanaysay sa Topograpiya ng Pelikula sa Filipinas*. (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2016), 15.

nation in cinema. It would be argued, however, that this construction does not just take place politically or culturally, more so, economically. Kojin Karatani would consider nation-formation as something which can also be located in economics: “[...]the nation is an “imagined community,” but it is not a mere fancy or fantasy; it functions as the imagination that mediates and synthesizes the state, [its apparatuses] and market society.”<sup>6</sup> He would further argue, however, that the existence of the nation economically differs from the general conception of the nation-state founded in commodity-exchange. He suggests looking at the nation as enacting reciprocal exchange.<sup>7</sup> But I would argue, however, that what Karatani is suggesting here can only be possible on nations which did not go through a history of colonization. Being in a post-colony presupposes that we look into the uneven exchanges set out the current condition and disposition of one nation. Unlike Japan, which was founded more in the dominance of an internal warlord, postcolonial nations like the Philippines was dominated from the exterior, hence, the conditions by which a nation’s economics, politics and conditions will differ since the source of hegemony came from somewhere else.

What I’m agreeing with Karatani is how the nation is imagined through exchange, albeit, an uneven exchange on postcolonial nations. With this, I’m offering a hypothesis: the nation is imagined through the

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<sup>6</sup> Kojin Karatani, *Nation and Aesthetics: On Kant and Freud*, Trans. Jonathan E. Abel, Hiroki Yoshikuni, Darwin H. Tsen, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 4.

formation of a national-subject. Under conditions of dominance, like ours, I'm arguing that the nation is imagined by the ruling class through a projection of themselves on others. It is in this instance that the symbols of nationality become important such as the flags, the anthems, and all the other images and texts which most has referred to as icons of the nation. The national-subject is constructed through its interpellation with the use of the national symbol.

But come 21<sup>st</sup> century, the dependence on national symbols has depleted. As instantiated with *Heneral Luna's* epilogue where we see a CGI Philippine Flag burning, with its conscious rejection to subject itself into any symbol, the imagination of the national subject becomes different. In a time when disbelief on national symbols or when the "framework" of the nation has been shaken, Karatani suggests that "empire" or world capitalism was being "referred to as an alternative principle to the nation."<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that the nation is being dissolved in this sense, but as exclusive exchange within the geopolitical boundaries are becoming harder to imagine, the sense of having symbols of nation is being treated as too "closed", openness to globalization is a feasible alternative for the liberalist logic. The task then, for *maindie* cinema as the site of liberalist construction of the nation through its subjects, is the construction of subjects which would definitely see themselves as part of this globalized imagined community. The subject, then, of a nation constructed under liberalism must be someone who believes in tolerance and openness, effaces the need

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 22.

for symbolization (which includes identification of one's self in a contradiction, or in symbolization through labor,) and firmly believes that even though the system is not perfect, it is still the best one he can have and there is no alternative for it (this nihilism is also one which is needed to be tolerated). The subject of a nation constructed under liberalism must be one which absorbs all these negation of symbolization and still performing / contributing to its economy through its conscious participation to commodity exchange: the modern-day cynic.

Faced with the challenge of taking-on globalization in the discourse of the liberalist construction of the Philippine nation in cinema, I see it fit to look into the work done by Jonathan Beller in his theorization of the world-media system as the basis of the economic base responsible for the reproduction of globalization in cinema. Beller here employs Guy Debord's concept of the "spectacle" on his theorization of the world-media system as a "higher articulation of "pseudo-community" of the commodity."<sup>9</sup> For him, the world-media system "names the organizational protocols that simultaneously structure culture and economy."<sup>10</sup> He further adds that these protocols engineer also the perception through machinations of what passes through both faces

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 22. Also, see See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 1995), 172.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Beller, *Acquiring Eyes: Philippine Visuality, Nationalist Struggle and the World-Media System*. (Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press, 2006), 6.



(repressive and ideological) of state apparatuses. The world-media system produces the “dominant network of abstractions that would organize all social processes in the service of capital.”<sup>11</sup> World-media system’s mode of social organization takes from the appropriation of global capital of what he calls the cinematic mode of production: cinema, for Beller, reproduces social life and subjects through the deployment of cinematic techniques.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on Louis Althusser, Beller would posit the reciprocity of this mode of production into the political: the mechanisms of the cinematic mode of production reproduces the subject “not only through wage labor [and the alienation of it] and the necessities that can be purchased with wage, but, psychologically, as it were, through a process [Althusser] called as interpellation – the calling of worker-subject into being by ideological apparatuses.”<sup>13</sup>

In this study, since we are considering cinema’s deployment of nationalism in the light of the cinematic mode of production, we are assuming that nationalism is indeed, an ideology. In a way, as Althusser would put it, nationalism can never exist in any other form but through apparatuses.<sup>14</sup> The national symbols as embodiments of the nation have legal origins and implications – the law as

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Beller, *Acquiring Eyes.*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production*, 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>14</sup> The argument over the materiality of ideology through its “exist[ence] in an apparatus and the practice or practices of that apparatus” marks the radical break of Althusserian theory of ideology from the conception of Marx in *The German Ideology*. See Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus*. (London: Verso, 2014), 184.

an ideological apparatus. Cinema, being the site of liberalist construction of the nation, is considered also as one of the apparatuses through which nationalism, being an ideology, exists.

## Reproduction of the Nation

As discussed in the earlier section, this essay perceives the construction of the nation through the construction of the nation-subject via the exchanges they encounter. In this sense, the construction also of subjectivity becomes important. The source of this subjectivity in its origin, however, is impossible to trace, as this also became a product of exchanges throughout history of the formation of the subject. As Jacques Lacan would put it, subjects “relay with each other in the course of intersubjective repetition,”<sup>15</sup> presupposing the formation of the subject has always been in a manner of exchange or, in Lacan’s terms, of discourse.

This is where I came to break with Karatani’s model of nation being imagined through reciprocal exchange and came with a different model fit with our country’s history of colonization and dominance. Intersecting with Lacan is Benedict Anderson’s reframing of the formation of the collective subjectivities which has led to nationalism “with consideration of the material, institutional and discursive bases.” The bases, as Anderson would like to

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*. Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 16.

suggest, generates two contrasting types of seriality: the *unbound* and the *bound*.<sup>16</sup> It is on these dialectical model that we can perceive the nationalist subjectivity came to be through its exchanges via the serialities generated by the material, institutional and discursive bases. The challenge here, and what is being addressed on this section of the essay, will be to locate cinema's place on those bases.

These bases that Anderson talks about are the various apparatuses in operation in the deployment of ideology. Its *bound*-ness, so to speak, can be considered as an effect of the operations of these apparatuses. On this complex network of apparatuses in operation, cinema can be found on one of its segments. Althusser identified a "number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions."<sup>17</sup> He called these the *Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA)*. Among these "realities" are the cultural ISAs where we can locate cinema functioning as apparatus. But, in the light of globalization, cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, can no longer be considered as merely *cultural* (in the manner that Althusser considered cultural ISAs as institution

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<sup>16</sup> The unbound seriality is "is exemplified by such open-to-the-world plurals as nationalists, anarchists, bureaucrats and workers. It is the seriality which makes the United Nations a normal, wholly unparadoxical institution." Bound seriality, on the other hand, "is exemplified by finite series like Asian-Americans, heurs, and Tutsis. It is the seriality that makes a United Ethnicities and United Identities unthinkable." See Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*. London: Verso, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 243.

separate from the trade and communication ISAs). Starting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, under capitalism, culture is already being captured by the economic to function as economic mediation. Beller further expounded:

Culture, then, has been recast and reprogrammed by the acculturated who, at every level of the socius, labor under the heliotropism of capital and its leveraged exchange. This capitalization of action, thought, the unconscious, and desire, among other biosocial functions, is otherwise known as commodification.<sup>18</sup>

It is in this sense that the break from Karatani is completed, as a reversal of his break from and consequently returning to Marx: of reconsidering the commodity exchange as a framework of rethinking the exchanges that happened in a nation which history of uneven development speaks a lot of its formation and construction. In the light of globalization, the repetition, distribution and the mimesis then of ideology – of nationalism – can never be but in the form of commodity exchange.

Cinema as an apparatus, can be said to appear as a specific form of ideology, among the the many apparatuses ideology can take shape from. The appearance of ideology in cinema is specific due to its specific form: the ideology is in the formal quality of the films. This form, of course, is determined by the political-economy which informs its content. Nationalism, being the content interrogated in this essay, also appears as such. But in the age when the nation's framework is being

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<sup>18</sup> Beller, *Acquiring Eyes*, 2.

shaken, nationalism in this sense, take an alternative principle, and that is of “Empire” or as Karatani would note it, of “world-capitalism”.<sup>19</sup>

## Negotiating with Empire

Since the notion of the “nation” is being uncomfortable – that is, the nation in the traditional sense of a closed economy in the realm of geopolitics, the recourse of liberal economics is to open itself to the global market. In the process, the effacement of any symbolization that would refer to the old nationalism has become a necessity. And in the process of exchange, it expects to produce a subject which is also open to this.

Cinema, in this sense, become paradoxical in its operation as apparatus: what is to be represented (since cinema mostly functions through representation and suggestion) if it aims for less symbolization? If it is the “traditional” notion of the nation that will be erased from representation, if not, “nationalism” itself, what then is to be done with cinema? It needs to have another object – another ideology – to represent. This was resolved by a new sub-genre in romantic comedy, which is *bugot*. The word literally means “to pull-out,” which in this context, a *bugot* in literary sense is a recontextualization of a certain passage or sentence which is *pulled-out* of personal reference

In an earlier study I made, I identified the way of which *bugot* films succeeds on reproducing ideology through the repetition of the dialogues uttered by the

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<sup>19</sup> Karatani, *Nation and Aesthetics*, 22.

characters into the films' visual plane.<sup>20</sup> The *bugot* in the film do not remain exclusively dialogical (it's no more a compendium of "*bugot* lines"), but is being repeated as a spectacle. What this signify in the context of the nation is that, what replaces the symbolizations and significations referring to anything that has something to do with the nation and nationalism are being replaced in *bugot* films by seeming representations of characters' frustrations.

For instance, in *That Thing Called Tadhana's* opening sequence, we see Mace (Angelica Panganiban) unloading her bag to clear her off the excess baggage weight at the exit terminal of an airport. Mace justified that it is heavy because it contains the totality of her life ("*dala ko kasi buong buhay ko dito*"). The things which are "the totality of her life" – what's she removing from her bag – are mostly things which suggest that reminds her of her former partner. In another scene, Anthony (JM De Guzman) tests Mace if she can still carry the bag while crossing a pedestrian over-pass. Mace said to Anthony that she still can and she doesn't need help ("*kaya ko*"). The bag which burdens her was suddenly left behind while they go for another trip to somewhere.

The same film-language is applied in *Ang Kwentong Nating Dalawa*, on one of its heightened confrontations. In a scene at a bar, Sam (Nicco Manalo) tried to talk things through with Isa (Emmanuelle Vera) on the state of their relationship. While Sam signaled with a hesitant silence, Isa tried to shift the topic over the script she's

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<sup>20</sup> The study is titled "Pick-up Lines and Hugot: pop-culture phenomena against the back drop of Philippine Base and Superstructure." This was written in partial fulfillment of Media Theory (Media 210) under Prof. Cecilia Ilagan.

writing for their screenwriting class. Isa, with an angry look on her face, read some lines from her script to Sam. The following is the exchange which took place between the characters, which highlights the displacement of their conditions towards another aspect of the film as a means of its repetition:

**Sam**

*Sorry. Kanina, para pala akong bata. Ang dami ko lang kasing realizations lately. Ako. Ako lang naman yung may problema sa 'tin, eh. (Sorry if I was acting like a kid earlier. I've just had a lot of realizations lately. That it is me, and only me who has problems between us.)*

**Isa**

*Uy.. Gandang line nun ah. Salamat, pwede ko bang hiramín para doon sa character doon sa script ko, si Mark? Ok ba? Pa-consult nga pala. Baka gusto mong basahin yung script ko, kaka-print ko lang bago pumunta dito. Pwede? (Hey, that's a good line. Can I use it for the character I've been writing on my script? As Mark's dialogue? I wanted to consult it with you. I just printed out my script before coming here, is that fine with you?)*

(Sam looks at Isa in silence)

**Isa (cont'd)**

*Tignan mo tong dialogue dito... Yung dialogue ng babae. Tignan mo kung sakto lang, kasi pakiramdam ko ang cheesy eh. Ito: "Parang ayoko na rin. Paulit-ulit na lang kasi tayong ganito since naging tayo. Kung nahibirapan ka, Mark, mas nahibirapan din ako. Kasi nagtitiis ako. At gawa ako ng gawa ng paraan." Cheesy, 'no? (Look at this dialogue here... The woman's. See if it's just right. I have a feeling that it's going to be cheesy. Here it goes: "Seems like I do not want to go on anymore. It's always*

*been like this ever since we get together. If you're having a hard time, Mark, I have it much harder. Because I've been keeping it in. But I am always finding ways to make us work." Cheesy, right?*

At the end of the film, it is revealed that Sam is actually Isa's instructor for the scriptwriting class. As Isa submitted her screenplay project, Sam browsed through the script until he reached the part where it says *Wakas* (End), immediately reached out to his pen and erased the word.

What is happening on both instances cited above can be said to be a repetition of the frustration into another filmic element from the dialogue. This repetition – a *hypersignification*, in a sense – becomes in itself, an avoidance for anymore signification. The frustrations repeated in the scenes persist as the only significant part of the story: it begs to be taken as it is. The films “speak[k] to itself about itself, without discrepancy.”<sup>21</sup> What is to be expected then, if we are considering this repetition as avoidance of signification as a mechanism of cinema-apparatus to reproduce ideology, of the subjects that it forms? Such formations identify the subject who is one which external contradictions are no longer a pressing matter, but all that must be resolved are exclusively personal. Beller stresses on this kind of signification as a kind of “flattening” between depth and signification where “[a]ll of the would-be contradictions, yesterday's

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<sup>21</sup> Jean Louis Comolli, and Jean Narboni. "Appendix I: Cinema/Ideology/Criticism." In Jean-Louis Comolli, *Cinema Against Spectacle*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 255.



contradictions, are on the surface, and since there is nothing but surface they are no longer contradictions.”<sup>22</sup>

What does this overdetermination of signification do? This is really what Beller called “capitalized mediation” wherein all of the signification’s spatial and metaphysical properties were “sublated by capital logic.”<sup>23</sup> Beller suggests that the images produced by these mediations, by highlighting its overloading of signification, are less of signs but are commodities. The filmic subjects (i.e. characters) disappear and become themselves bearers of exchange-value/use-value logic. This is exemplified by the way the characters relate to each other. Mace and Anthony met and mostly form their relationship on their trips (which are not for free). The same goes with the girls of *Camp Sami* (Viva Films 2016) and *I’m Drunk I Love You* (TBA 2017). *Camp Sami* itself is an actual getaway lodge and their relation to the Camp Master is basically just one of the services offered by the resort. Most of the interactions in *I’m Drunk I Love You* happened not just over alcohol, but also on places where *hypercommodification* happens (bar and the music festival). Isa and Sam, being student and teacher from De La Salle – Saint Benilde, inevitably has their relation placed on a hypercommodified environment: from their school cafeteria to the bar where they hang out.

Complementing the elimination of depth is the “annihilation of laws and boundaries that have, in the past, delimited the movement of the signifier.” This functions, in the films above, through the films’

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<sup>22</sup> Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production*, 219.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 220.

elimination of the characters' identities as workers through setting the films in the time when work is at rest: vacation, trips, graduation. What the characters do for a living in those films are mostly being talked about in passing, some in detail, but never really bear any significance to the progress of its narrative. We are left with nothing in the films but to trust whatever they say who they are.

In *That Thing Called Tadhana*, the film is set at the time of the characters' arrival from a foreign country. They talked about careers, Mace told Anthony about a "career she gave up" so he can go to Italy and live with her former partner. Anthony talked about wanting to be an artist. But since the setting of the film was in their vacation, nothing can be seen which proves that Mace and Anthony are who they say they are. In *Ang Kwentong Nating Dalawa*, most of the film is set on class-breaks and after-class. There's one sequence where Sam was seen sitting in a classroom, but eventually left. Their identities as workers — student and teacher — was only used as a plot-twist in the end. But the twist never helped forward this dynamics, but rather, pushed further the discourse of the affection (or the impossibility of it) between Sam and Isa. In *I'm Drunk I Love You*, it is mentioned through dialog that Carson (Maja Salvador) is a social welfare student and Dio (Paolo Avelino) is a film student. But since the film is set comfortably on their days before graduation, not to mention, their La Union vacation, so we can't see them doing any student-like activities.

This leads us to the discussion of the subjects constructed through the characters of the films mentioned above. What kind of a subject can be

produced if we are to combine the removal of any form of collective identification, such as nationality, class, work-force into the mirroring signification? What can be produced from the negation of presence? To clarify, there are still representations in the film-image of the subject, only this representation is being determined by a negation of anything that can be said to be “traditionally” symbolic. The symbols relating to any collective identification are being replaced by a highly individualistic character on screen. One of which identification is still symbolic, but only in the form of commodities.

### The Liberal Nation-Subject: The Modern-day Cynic

Looking at the end of *I'm Drunk, I Love You* made me reflect a lot on the idea of cynicism. In its final sequence, we see Carson and Dio drinking in front of a store. Dio is still wearing his graduation get-up, while Carson already has changed her clothes. The scene, taken into the context of the film, do not really close the film in such a manner that it is being resolved. The seemingly open-end does not quite have that tone. Instead, the film, even from its beginning, sets itself in a certain distance as such that it can only be taken “as it is.”<sup>24</sup> If so, it is an ending *without an end*. It is incapable of imagining such things: it does not resolve the loop that Carson is trapped in the shadows of Dio. It does not propose any

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<sup>24</sup> I've made a longer note on *I'm Drunk, I Love You* on my blog: <https://missingcodec.wordpress.com/2017/08/23/two-ways-of-alienation/>

alternative for Carson. Rather, the film does not seem to believe that there will be any.

While not being a perfect manifestation, the end sequence of *I'm Drunk, I Love You* can be seen as a symptom of what Mark Fisher identifies as *Capitalist Realism*. The concept of Capitalist Realism can be explained in summary using the idea of the actual resort in *Camp Sawi*: the camp participants all went with the hope of moving on, only to prepare them for another round of falling in love. *Camp Sawi* gridlocks its participants on the loop of moving-on and trying again. If not now, maybe, as the words Gwen (Arci Muñoz) and Bridgette (Bela Padilla) gave a toast to at the end of the film, “someday” (*balang-aram*). The notion of love – and the preparation, moving on from it – is what is being commodified by *Camp Sawi*. Like most of the relationships on the films mentioned on this section, this gridlock is nothing more than the gridlock to capitalism. What happens here is that the belief of love is being collapsed into a ritual/loop or symbolic elaboration that “all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and relics.”<sup>25</sup>

A capitalist realism has a cynical tone to it. As Fisher would put it, “capitalist realism presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself.”<sup>26</sup> By belief, it means any more speculation outside of the capitalist logic. Capitalism, as Fisher would extend it, “brings with it a massive desacralization of culture”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hants: Zer0 Books, 2009), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 6.

which, in effect, actively and forcefully “deideologize[s] art and literature,” which is, as Edel Garcellano would put it, “at the heart of liberalist hermeneutics.”<sup>28</sup> These desacralizations and deidologizations effectively brings the subject in a cynical distance between things, and should supposedly bring reason onto a new enlightenment through doubt towards “objectivity.”

Peter Sloterdijk referred to cynicism as an “enlightened false consciousness:” the term *false consciousness* used here is the same when Engels<sup>29</sup> referred to it as the consciousness which is at operation in the process of ideology. Sloterdijk would insist, however, that cynicism is itself an heir to the enlightenment through its critical engagement with it: its critical engagement with enlightenment is precisely its fundamental nature. Cynicism constitutes “a consciousness afflicted with enlightenment that, having learned from historical experience, refutes cheap optimism.” It “scarcely allow itself any hope, at most a little irony and pity.”<sup>30</sup>

Sloterdijk’s description of cynicism places the cynical subject in a position of awareness. Slavoj Žižek would expound more on Sloterdijk:

The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the

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<sup>28</sup> Edel Garcellano, *Intertext*, (Manila, Kalikasan Press, 1991), 58.

<sup>29</sup> See Frederick Engels, “Engels to Franz Mehring,” in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 50. 1892-95 Letters*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2004) 163-167.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 6.

less still insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be: 'they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it'. Cynical reason is no longer naive, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.<sup>31</sup>

Capitalist realism, in this sense, can be seen in the light of cynicism that insists upon the mask of capitalism for its defense. If we refer back to *I'm Drunk, I Love You*, we see the same attitude if we perceive Carson and Dio's relationship as a metaphor for this. Carson know too well that it is the vagueness of her relationship to Dio that's making her miserable. Dio is quite aware too. But they both insist on supporting each other's enjoyment at a certain distance.

Cynicism further empowers liberalist openness: since a cynic does what it does despite knowing what it is he's doing, he proceeds to but with a certain distance, which on most cases, leads to its own complicity with capital. Such is the case of a significant part of the independent film culture. Fisher would claim that the "establishment of settled 'alternative' or 'independent' cultural zones" such as the independent film scene, do not really "designate something outside mainstream

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<sup>31</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. The Essential Zizek Series, (London: Verso, 2008), 25-26.

culture; rather, they are styles, in fact the dominant styles, within the mainstream.”<sup>32</sup> These zones and scenes may be considered as the cynical spaces of film production of which, if given a certain amount of time to mature, would be open to its cooptation to the mainstream.

*Maindie*, being the site of liberalist construction of the national subject, is also the site of cooptation of the independent scene by the mainstream. And so retains itself parts of the cynical attitude it bears from its beginnings. For instance, in the film *Apocalypse Child* (TBA 2015), Ford (Sid Lucero) knows too well that what her mother said who his father was is ultimately false, her mother knows too well too, but they continue to live the made-up story. The maintenance of this false consciousness is important to have them all go on living out their desire. It is this false consciousness that became their standard for living.

What for me cynicism opens ultimately is this negotiation with violence. Claudio’s defense of liberalism only places its position to aver anything that is deemed extremist. In his own words, liberals “are willing to compromise.” That being said, liberals have this “willingness to get hands dirty” which “lands liberals in the halls of power.”<sup>33</sup> But what of non-totalitarian violence? Claudio can only give “moderation” and “tolerance” as a response, since the greatest liberal pursuit is *modus vivendi*. Since for him, there is a necessity for a “politics of mediation.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Claudio, *Liberalism and the Postcolony*, 151.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

This politics of mediation is apparent also in *Apocalypse Child*. The end sequence of the film is a mediation between the tyrannical father's legacy through Rich (RK Bagatsing) and the orphaned Oedipus, Ford. Instead of condemnation, a pragmatic response can be heard from Rich's resolve over the history of abuses from his father: after all, he's learned a lot from his father and his abuses ("*marami akong natutunan sa kanya*").

In another film, *Hele sa Himagang Hapis* (Epicmedia/Sine Olivia 2016), a postmodern re-imagination of Jose Rizal's *El Filibusterismo*, one of the characters, Padre Florentino (Menggie Cobarrubias), is telling Basilio (John Lloyd Cruz) to forgive Simoun (Piolo Pascual) of his past mistakes: to forgive Simoun of his initial collaboration with the Spaniards since, as Florentino would see it, he's trying to make up for it. Basilio is insisting that he shouldn't at first. But after sometime of staying with Simoun at Florentino's hut, Basilio started to doubt his resolve. In the end, he asked Florentino that if he's forgiven, what would happen to the effects of his action to the revolution. Why do things need to end up the way it is? All fundamental questions pertaining to Simoun's actions' effects to history. Florentino left the answer to Basilio that only the young ones, in reference to the future, can answer his questions. ("*kayong mga nakababata ang makakasagot niyan*")

There are two things that are being mediated here: first, is the actual violence done by Rich's father to him, defending it for its supposed pedagogical effect; second, is the violence done by Simoun for the liberation movement, which is being defended by incorporating Basilio with Florentino's appeal for forgiveness. Cynicism



here as a political mediation displaces violence from its systematic and institutional origins to a more pragmatic and personal approach: “it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation; it proceeds *ad hominem*”<sup>35</sup> Michael Neu noted that these moderation perceives such violence as just, and hence his collective concept for these kinds of violence as *just liberal violence*. “The liberal framework,” according to Neu, “is obsessed with individuals [but are] blind to social hierarchies and interconnectedness.” What is being forwarded as a replacement to systematic critique is an extreme moralization: “a fixat[ion to press] the complex material world into a binary moral structure of right and wrong.”<sup>36</sup>

It isn’t surprising, from this context that one of *Maindie*’s most successful film in terms of box-office, *Heneral Luna*, wraps itself up in the notion of the assumption of individual agency as the largest perpetrator of the nation’s demise and not its colonizers. On confronting the cabinet and the President, Antonio Luna (John Arcilla) remarked the following statement as a response to the sentiments of the businessmen at the meeting: “*May mas malaking kaaway tayo maliban sa mga Amerikano: ang ating sarili.*” (“We have a greater enemy than the Americans: ourselves.”) Preceding sequences suggest the justification of this statement to mean exactly what it means: there are no instances of American violence against the Filipinos, war is depicted as a dignified and highly coded activity. At the end of the film,

<sup>35</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Neu, *Just Liberal Violence*. (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 100.

Luna was “executed” at the grounds of Aguinaldo’s backyard. What sets the tone which supports the earlier quote isn’t the execution itself, but the montage of subjective scenes which includes Americans laughing at the audience (addressing them as Filipinos) for “killing their finest war commander.”

In the very last instance, cynicism brings about a highly individualize look at formation of history, individual or collective. Since the cynical subject doubts any institutions to actually affect his or her life, the blame is placed onto the individual’s agency alone. Neu places this reactive agency as the agency “to act rightly regardless of awful things can get.”<sup>37</sup> But the object here of “blame” isn’t one’s agency *per se*, but rather the individual subject himself. Mark Fisher would refer to this mechanism as “*responsibilisation*.” It is the tactic wherein “[e]ach individual member of the subordinate class is encouraged into feeling that their poverty, lack of opportunities, or unemployment, is their fault and their fault alone.”<sup>38</sup> It has become a dead-end for the cynic, since he no longer believes on institutions, the statement of Luna in the film can act as an overdetermination of his being: that indeed, him and only himself is the enemy.

## The Nation under Permanent Midnight

Nick Dunn would remind us, on his reflection of the Nocturnal City, that “despite of the increasing

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Fisher, “Good for Nothing” in *The Fisher-Function*, (London: [egress], 2017), 40.

homogenization of different places, it is important to emphasize from the outset that cities are not neutral containers nor aspecial.”<sup>39</sup> We can look at our cynics on the same manner: despite of their seeming homogenized existence, they can never be considered as anyone neutral. If anything, their liberalist orientation of openness and negotiation made them complicit with whatever the liberalist construction of the nation is being complicit to, in this case, globalization.

The third person in the short film *Year of Permanent Midnight* is the very manifestation of the cynical subject: he mediates between the global heist and the seeming unimportance of the conflict that the other two characters bear. He instead, due to his distrust over the two as representative of institutions, helped himself on getting most of the exploits of their heist. His reign over the two marked the start of their life under permanent midnight.

The Permanent Midnight I’m referring to, which I lifted off the film’s title, is the reign of the liberal thought over the country’s political economy. The cynic as a product of the liberal-construction of the nation, is also a historical product of the country under liberalism. If as Claudio would like to claim, that we’ve had a long history of Liberalism – as old as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century – it is then that our production of the cynic as a subject is something that the country is historically determined to have. But this can only be made possible, and intensified, with the acceleration of global capital. The cynic is the product of

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<sup>39</sup> Nick Dunn, *Dark Matters: A Manifesto for the Nocturnal City*. London: Zero Books, 2016.

liberalist negotiation to globalization. *The years of permanent midnight* has finally realized itself in this era of global capital being mediated through everyday negotiation of liberal values with exploiting classes and capitalist practices.

In a nation under permanent midnight, literally, everything becomes possible as long as it is within the bounds of negotiation. Even violence is somehow permissible, but the validation of it does not come from the subject. The 2016 documentary *Sunday Beauty Queen* is witness to this. In the film, the subjects are captured most of the time on their day-offs, either preparing for or participating at the beauty pageants organized by the Filipinos in Hong Kong as charity events. While the subjects themselves are revealing how is it hard to live as domestic worker in Hong Kong, even some of them getting rid of their employment but unable to get back, it would only take one statement from one employer, who happened to be a film producer in Hong Kong, to justify all these violence that the domestic workers experience: “without the domestic workers,” according to the employer interviewed, “Hong Kong will not be as great as it is now.”

The nation under permanent midnight, being at the excess of darkness, shrouds the structures which takes root of its conditions. Cynicism, ironically, as a guiding light, is blind of the structures. He is entrapped by a global mode of mediation. Beller notes of the role of the world-media system: it constructs a subject whose humanity, “under globalization,” is “enjoined to produce

its own nonexistence.”<sup>40</sup> The subject produced by the liberalist construction was abjected of his symbolic existence, and was left out as himself a mediation between commodities. The cynic, the subject produced by the liberalist construction of the nation, is also the perfect consumer of the global market.

The production of the cynic as a national subject, as mentioned earlier, can only be possible on a specific time. This time is covered by the films read for this study. It is the time after all the trust in institutions are displaced towards technology. The mainstream-indie-liberal politics connection traces back to the perceived beginning of the so-called Philippine New Wave. While independent film production has always been historically a practice in Philippine cinema, commentators, as Tolentino would suggest, traces the roots of the “movement” at the beginning of Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival in 2005.<sup>41</sup> What sets this movement against older independent film practices is their use of the digital technology as medium. Lav Diaz identifies the Digital Technology as “liberation theology”.<sup>42</sup> In earlier writings,

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<sup>40</sup> Beller, *Acquiring Eyes*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Tolentino, *Indie Cinema*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> “Digital is liberation theology. Now we can have our own media . The internet is so free, the camera is so free. The issue is not anymore that you cannot shoot. You have a Southeast Independent Cinema now. We have been deprived for a long time, we have been neglected, we have been dismissed by the Western media. That was because of production logistics. We did not have money, we did not have cameras, all those things. Now, these questions have been answered. We are on equal terms now. Now there are new people who are doing these very different things, such as Raya Martin, John Torres, or Khavn de la Cruz in the Philippines.” Tilman Baumgärtel, “Digital is Liberation

Khavn dela Cruz also sought the coming of digital technology as something which is positive for the artist and even assumes a “democratization of filmmaking” which enables the filmmaker to “shoot [his/her] opus in any [video] format.”<sup>43</sup>

Technological determinism on the part of earlier practitioners of digital filmmaking is very telling of liberalism in a way that the coming of the digital technology also assumes that one is now free to do whatever he wants on whatever way he wants with the medium. For some time, the practice remained true to its political economy: dela Cruz and Diaz both have their own production outfits making their own films on their own time. Eduardo Dayao saw the movement back then as something similar to punk rock.<sup>44</sup> But like punk and its offshoot, grunge, indies got easily coopted by the mainstream after some years. This is due to indies’ failure to sustain a critique of the mainstream: but this failure is not because of it not being conscious of its position in relation to the mainstream, but as Tolentino would also

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Theology’: an interview with Lav Diaz” in Tilman Baumgärtel (ed.), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 177.

<sup>43</sup> Khavn dela Cruz, “Four Manifestos” in Tilman Baumgärtel (ed.), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 122.

<sup>44</sup> “Roughly ten years ago, give or take, independent cinema was punk rock (or hip-hop) for filmmakers, with the same energy, the same sense of adventurism, the same love for new forms, the same fervor for cross-pollination, the same carte blanche, the same economic freedom, the same disregard for gatekeepers, who were eventually cast out as their counter parts around the world.” Eduardo Dayao, “Sleeping with the Enemy.” *Kino Punch*, (2015), 40.

contend, in his commentaries of the films *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank* (2011) and *Ang mga Kidnapper ni Ronnie Lazaro* (2012), that the indies are already aware that they are no longer in the age to assume any innocence of the practices (and excesses) that they appropriated from the mainstream, which is why a significant part of its earlier history were not dedicated to critique.<sup>45</sup>

But, since the limit of discourse of the then independent movement is technological-determinist in essence, it fails to sustain a running critique and resistance to the dominating practice of the ruling institutions. The arguments of digital liberation are left open to negotiation since it is mainly grounded on the celebration of technology. By 2012, all SM cinemas in the country have become fully digitized,<sup>46</sup> which signaled a change, too, for mainstream studios to shift into digital filmmaking. From filmmaking in the periphery for friends and selected venues, practices of big studios trickled down for the independent scene to follow.

As the great structures of power of the studio system managed to coopt the once-independent digital movement, it too has become the vessel of dominant-state agenda and ideology. It isn't an accident that

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<sup>45</sup> Tolentino, *Indie Cinema*, 5, Tolentino will also further stress that the major contributing factor for the mainstream appropriation of the digital medium is Cinemalaya's emphasis for the development of "mainstream look" for independent productions which stresses on "narrative, continuity and suture," similar to classical Hollywood narrative films. Ibid, 15.

<sup>46</sup> "SM Cinema goes full digital." 27 August 2012. *The Philippine Star*.

<http://www.philstar.com/entertainment/2012/08/27/842405/sm-cinema-goes-full-digital>. (accessed 05 November 2017).

mainstream-indie exchange, or *maindie*, zeniths in 2014, at the middle of the liberal administration of President Benigno Aquino III. It is then that the political-economic environment at the time is ripe and made possible to imagine this kind of openness as attuned with liberal values. The Aquino administration boasts of economic achievements as reflected by Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) increase and revenue from IT-BPO industries.<sup>47</sup> The then-administration's Public-Private Partnership programs (PPPP) was also highlighted as signs of confidence of the public and private sectors.<sup>48</sup> PPPP has extended towards cinema through Quezon City's Local Government Unit's establishment of its own festival, QCinema International Film Festival, back in 2013, which give grants to filmmakers to produce films which will be premiered in the festival. The festival expands from just

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<sup>47</sup> FDIs increased from \$11.77 B (2005-2010) to \$20.42 B (2011-2015) while IT-BPO revenues increased to more than 200% as compared with its revenue before the Aquino administration. *Achievements Under the Aquino Administration*, (Manila: Presidential Communications Development and Strategic Planning Office, 2016), 4-5.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Marcelo: "Kayo na po ang magkumpara sa pagkakaiba. Dati walang nakikisama sa proyekto ngayon nag-uunahan na ang mga pribadong kumpanya at nagbibigay ng premium," Aquino said. Aquino said that while before, the government has to offer numerous fiscal incentives to attract companies to enter into a PPP deal with the government, now, private firms are the ones offering premiums to the government in order to secure PPP projects Elizabeth Marcelo. "PNoy cites PPP projects as proof of confidence in his administration." *GMA News Online*. <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/529626/pnoy-cites-ppp-projects-as-proof-of-confidence-in-his-administration/story/> (accessed 05 November 2017).



producing and exhibiting three films in 2013 to featuring 38 films from both commissioned works to invited films from international and local filmmakers. It isn't just the QCinema-filmmaker relationship which is reflective of PPPP, but also within QCinema. QCinema is being organized by a private studio, VPF Creative Productions, presented as a main partner. QCinema has opened a way for a budding studio, TBA,<sup>49</sup> to have most of its production be co-produced in the festival.

It should be noted, however, that despite of the achievements that the Aquino administration claims, the over-all economic condition has not changed throughout the country. The liberal and elitist policies of the Aquino administration have resulted to the intensification of what Amado Guerrero identified long before as “uneven and spasmodic development” in the different parts of the country.<sup>50</sup> The Communist Party of the Philippines’ Central Committee would add: “[t]he illusion of economic growth in 2013 and 2014 is due to the heavy inflow of portfolio investments to the Philippine financial markets from the US and other foreign hedge funds. This kind of financial flow amounted to more than 60 percent of total inflows. The remittances of overseas contract workers and net inflows from exports amounted to a

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<sup>49</sup> TBA is an abbreviation for three production companies it represents: Tuko Film Productions owned by real-estate comprador Fernando Ortigas, Buchi Boy Films owned by film producer and actor Eduardo A. Rocha, and Artikulo Uno, also owned by Ortigas.

<sup>50</sup> Amado Guerrero. *Philippine Society and Revolution*. (Manila: Aklat ng Bayan, Inc., 2006), 64.

small part.”<sup>51</sup> Ibon Foundation’s summation of their assessment of the Aquino administration would support this statement: “Even if FDIs increased and employment grew, jobs creation has fallen from 1.1 million in 2011 to just 638,000 in 2015. There has also been a 543,000 addition to the number of underemployed Filipinos in the same period, showing that there are now more temporary, low-paying and insecure jobs in the business-biased economy. Moreover, 63% of the total employed are non-regular, agency-hired, informal sector, or unpaid family workers. Wages have also been very insufficient: the P481 National Capital Region minimum wage, which is the highest across all regions, make less than half of the P1,093 family living wage or the amount needed by a family of six for subsistence. Aquino vetoed proposed increases in nurses’ salaries and the elderly’s pensions.”<sup>52</sup>

In this complex history, the subject which is formed under these conditions is set into a field wherein institutions, due to it either being incomprehensible or just outright elitist, can no longer be trusted. It is as such that most films also depicted it that way: on most *bugot* films, while agency are being considered, the individuals’ fate is being left into the care of commodities to accompany the effacement of institutionalized values and identities, at least in representations. Intensified by most *maindie* productions’ call for responsabilisation, like in *Heneral Luna*, the individual has firmly wrapped himself

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<sup>51</sup> "Intensify the Offensives on a National Scale to Advance the People's Democratic Revolution." *Ang Bayan* 29 March 2015, 5.

<sup>52</sup> "Elitist politics and economics: the real Aquino legacy." 01 July 2016. Ibon. <http://ibon.org/2016/07/elitist-politics-and-economics-the-real-aquino-legacy/>. (accessed 05 November 2017)

into the web created for himself. The nation which the liberalist construction would like to have is a nation which subjects prolong his own displacement from the collective identities he formerly holds, towards a new imagination of perceived “borderlessness.” The liberalist construction of the nation places its subject on an imaginary “independence” while being negotiated for the global market.

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